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Sherry Thompson, Managing Director, Library Services, Majors Scientific Books

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Interview with Sherry Thompson

Managing Director, Library Services, Majors Scientific Books <sthompso@www.majors.com>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

I met her long time ago in another life when I was a medical librarian. And it has taken me this long to get to know her better. We did part of this interview in person amid the ALA chaos and finished it up over the phone one Saturday. She was fighting off a case of laryngitis, but she didn't skip a beat! This woman deserves all of our admiration! — KS

ATG: Sherry, I am amazed by your energy, enthusiasm, and efficiency. You were with Majors Scientific Books, Inc. in the subscriptions division for nine years. How did you make the transition from journals to books when Majors sold their subscription business? You decided to stay with Majors and learn the book business?

ST: Yes, I did. I'm happy I stayed with Majors. It's been three years since we sold the subscription business. I was fortunate that Majors created a position for me as Director of Marketing. Now it continues to be up to me to make it pay off for them. It wasn't easy to make the transition to books. I started my position in books as though I was with a new company — I did formal training throughout the company, like any new employee would that begins with Majors. I quickly learned to appreciate the complexity of the book business. When I was in subscriptions I had the mistaken impression that books were easy, and journals were hard. However, the Internet, electronic publishing, and multimedia has brought new life and excitement to the entire profession and it's now more challenging than ever.

The market today is driven by value-added services. We may offer the same service in different ways using new technology. We're always listening and asking, "What else can we do?" with what we have. Our business isn't just books anymore. We are an information distributor. One example of creating new services out of older ones, is our new CD-ROM publication, **majors.docsm**. **majors.docsm** allows people to search our database, including tables of contents, using Windows technology. The same information is available in a little different format on our online system, **MOREsm**. **MOREsm**, developed in 1982, is an online ordering system, **majorssm.docsm** is a reference tool, but the information for both comes from the same database. We are always working on putting information in its most usable format. It's a constant challenge. Just about the time we think we have done it all — we go to ALA!

ATG: Why did Majors sell the subscription business and keep the book business? Journals were a pretty lucrative part of the business, weren't they?

ST: Yes, subscriptions were a lucrative part of the business. No one ever believed that Majors would get out of the subscription business, least of all, me. We were very pleased that out of 23 people in the journals division we placed 18 of them in other positions within the company or at EBSCO.

It was an emotional decision for me. I loved journals and I loved working with **Bill Leazer**, who went to work for EBSCO at the time of the sale. But, looking back, I think the decision was a good one. We were worried that the cost of document delivery could jeopardize our entire company's well-being — as we have since witnessed with the



sale of Faxon. We were doing very well in the business, but, quite frankly, EBSCO made us an offer that was too good to refuse.

Obviously, company sales went down when we sold the subscriptions, but sales are up now, and we have recouped the majority of the subscriptions sales in the past three years — even in an environment where libraries' book budgets are being cut. At the time the sale seemed risky to me but it turned out to be an extremely wise business decision.

ATG: You've been at Majors for twelve years. You came up through the ranks. Tell us about your meteoric rise to Managing Director of Library Services.

ST: I am proud of the fact that I started with the company as an account specialist in the subscriptions department. After a couple of short years, my responsibilities were expanded to include traveling to various accounts and overseeing the customer service aspect of the division. I became manager of the journal division three years before it was sold. Majors is a great company to work for. It's a relatively flat organization that promotes lots of interaction and communications on all levels. Our main strengths are our attention to service and the stability of the people. As I said earlier, after the subscription sale Majors created the position of Director of Marketing to Libraries for me. In that position I oversaw our ad campaigns and worked with our customers to review current services and think about new ones. Last summer I was promoted to Managing Director of Library Services. I'm still responsible for marketing, but my responsibilities have grown to include our approval plan and continuations division.

ATG: What's it like to work for a family business? I found out some information about Majors from your home page <<http://www.majors.com>>

ST: Majors was founded back in the late 1800's when Dr. Majors was in medical school. I believe the most important part of what he brought to the company was The Golden Rule. It has remained the company philosophy and has been an important part of our success and growth. Good service only results from employees' desire to give good service — it can't be legislated — and they care only if the owners care and are present to watch over it. Employees like the close family involvement. It creates an atmosphere of warmth and appreciation. The Majors have always taken the long view when making important business decisions. This is unlike CEOs of large publicly-held companies whose careers depend upon the bottom line and who, therefore, have a tendency to make short-sighted decisions. Majors has a rich heritage that we are all proud of and I think we have an interesting history.

We are one of the oldest medical book distributors in this country. We were incorporated by **Dr. J. A. Majors** in 1909, and we've become the largest distributor of health science books in the United States, with warehouses and offices in four major cities: Dallas, Atlanta, Houston, and Los Angeles.

After working his way through medical school by selling books to doctors during summer vacations and in his spare time, Dr. Majors

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needed financing to begin his medical career. Upon graduation, what had started as a part-time job became a lifetime profession in the medical book business. He established his first headquarters in New Orleans, Louisiana, and let the major medical book publishers at that time know of his desire to warehouse their books and represent them in the South. A few years later, in 1914, he opened a second office and warehouse in Dallas, Texas (the corporate headquarters, which is now located in Dallas), and in 1948 established a third branch in Atlanta, Georgia. The Company continued to grow, and in 1956 a fourth office and warehouse was opened in Houston's famed **Texas Medical Center**. In 1964 the Houston Branch expanded into the sci-tech market, maintaining an inventory of books in business and management, geosciences, electronics, chemistry, physics and other highly specialized fields. In 1986 Majors acquired **Medical & Technical Books** in Los Angeles, California, giving the company a coast-to-coast distribution network.

Dr. Majors passed away in 1963 at the age of 91. His two sons, **J. A. Majors, Jr.**, and **William H. Majors**, are Chairmen of both **J. A. Majors Company** and **Majors Scientific Books, Inc.** **J. A. Majors, III**, is President of **J. A. Majors Company** and **J. A. Majors Company—California**, a subsidiary, and **Albert Majors McClendon** is President of **Majors Scientific Books, Inc.** Both are grandsons of Dr. **J. A. Majors**.

ATG: *How did you come to work for Majors in the first place?*

ST: I joined the staff in January 1984, exactly twelve years ago. My sister-in-law worked at Majors, and she told Bill Leazer about me because she thought I would fit in well since I was working on my library science degree. Bill wanted a librarian on staff, and, although I hadn't yet graduated, he wanted to take the chance that

I would be a valuable addition to the staff. When Bill and I met, we hit it off right away. Two weeks after he interviewed me, he called me and asked me if I would be interested in coming to work for Majors. Bill took me under his wing, and to continue a weak metaphor, he always said I took to subscriptions like a duck to water. He immediately began introducing me to librarians and generally promoted me as an asset to Majors. I learned a lot from Bill. He's an incredible person to work with. He was constantly creating some new service, promotional piece or newsletter to help librarians know about subscriptions and Majors. When I came to work at Majors we didn't have any librarians on staff. We now have five librarians on staff and Bill was a major force in helping us to see the contribution that librarians would make to our business. I'm still piggybacking on stuff that Bill created!

ATG: *You amaze me. You went back and went to library school somewhere in this story?*

ST: Yes, in August of 1993 I finished my Masters in Information Science from the **University of North Texas**. I received my bachelors in psychology and my bachelors in library and information science there as well. I did my graduate work very quickly, with a lot of support from Majors. I had to cut way back on my travel schedule. I had been in school most of the time I had been at Majors. It felt great to have that behind me so I could focus on business.

ATG: *As a librarian, what do you want to add to the conversation about the role of libraries and librarians in the future. This issue of ATG has several discussions of our emerging role as information providers.*

ST: As I mentioned earlier, librarians play a primary role at Majors Scientific Books. Librarians help us make the best use of technology

and one of the reasons for that is because they are good at taking systems apart (books, collection development, etc.) and categorizing them. We have several significantly-placed librarians working at Majors. As Managing Director of Library Services, my job is to see the big picture. I rely heavily on **Susan Gerding Bader**, Director of Library Services, for input on our approval plan and related services.

We've just created the new position of Special Projects Librarian and have placed **Marie Nuchols** in that position. Marie will have the opportunity to have her finger in a little bit of everything, including multimedia. Multimedia is becoming an important part of our business. She will also oversee our home page — keeping it current and updated, not just a marketing location. She will do systems analysis, especially of any processes still being done manually (there are not many anymore). She will help us to exploit technology fully. And, besides all that, she will back up Susan on the approval plan. Marie worked as an intern for us while she was in library science graduate school. We have an intern program through the University of North Texas which we started about 4 or 5 years ago as a result of our relationship with the school and, especially, Dr. Ana Cleveland. Dr. Cleveland heads up the medical librarianship program at UNT and was my graduate school advisor. It can be hard for a person to make the transition from libraries to the business world, but Marie has done a great job.

We also have a librarian in our LA branch, **Jim Progar**. Jim works with bookstores primarily but he's getting into libraries more and more. His mother was a librarian so he has it in his blood. **Pam Anderson Kerns** is our northeastern sales coordinator who lives in New York. Pam was a librarian in North Carolina before joining the book distributor world. Pam is an important sounding board for us since she visits libraries each week and is first to see many trends.

Now to further answer your question, I do believe that librarians

“[L]ibrarians will be an important asset to the future of knowledge provision.”

will be an important asset to the future of knowledge provision. However, it is up to us to sell ourselves as the contribution we are to the user population, and proactivity is the name of the

game. Taking advantage of smart business tactics will be mandatory for us in this new world where everyone thinks finding information is easy and that anyone can do it.

ATG: *What's your typical day like at Majors? You travel a lot?*

ST: Typical day? I do travel a lot. Traveling is hard work but it's an important skill to have — you must be flexible and be able to move around easily. It expands what you are able to get done. I am not crazy about travel, but I do love being in libraries. My mother was a school librarian until she married and stayed home to raise her children, and then she ran the church library. So I grew up in libraries — when I was young, I read a lot and found a lot of comfort in being in that environment. Sometimes I would forget to go to class — time would just get away from me. I like old libraries. The new ones are great too, but the old ones, like the **Mayo Clinic Library**, make me feel secure and relaxed. However, I recently visited the new library at the **University of California—Irvine**. It is an extremely modern library and it's wonderful, too, for different reasons. It is set up perfectly for technology. The lighting, the computers. Or the **Univ. of North Texas Health Sciences Libraries** in Fort Worth. It was built with all the modern conveniences but still has wood and plush deep colors so you get the feeling of an older library.

ATG: *Tell us more. Where were you born? What do you do for fun?*

ST: I am a fifth generation Texan, born in Lubbock and bred in Dallas. I'm married to a wonderfully supportive man named **Ross**. We have no human children, just three dogs, all sitting here with me right now (3 Shihtzus and 1 mutt). For fun, and to keep me sane after a hectic

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think teachers are motivators and it's much more fun to learn when you've got a great teacher or motivator than to learn on your own. After law school I clerked for a judge for three years part-time on weekends, for **Judge David Tolbert**, who was the main Surface Mining Law judge in Knoxville, Tennessee. I clerked for him from 1988 until 1990 and it was some of the most exciting times of my life, but I was working 55 hours a week and writing his opinions on weekends. So I decided I was too old to be a lawyer. The only area of the law that I keep up with is copyright.

ATG: *I would think that your law background would be a great asset.*

ALC: I think it doesn't hurt to be able to say that you have a doctors of jurisprudence. I think that law is a wonderful training of the mind. It certainly is a good credential to have. We are going from a period when we purchased items, books and periodicals, to a period when we are increasingly licensing information, and it certainly doesn't hurt to have an understanding of copyright law. I believe that copyright does the wonderful thing of preserving and giving back to the creators and protecting the creators of material. If we didn't have copyright law we wouldn't have the production, the publishing, that we have in this country. And librarians often lose site of that. Librarians are really interested in providing access to information. And there's a conflict

between providing free access, open access to information and rewarding the owners of copyrights. That's the basis of the conflict between the library world and the publishing world today, in my opinion.

ATG: *Parting question: what do you like to read?*

ALC: Well, at the moment I am rereading **Richard Marius' *Coming of Rain*** which is an absolutely wonderful novel. He sets his novels in East Tennessee. I love novels; they are a huge escape. I'm reading **Pat Conroy's *Beach Music***. I loved his ***Lords of Discipline***. We are so overwhelmed with library literature, keeping up with it, that it is ... where would we be if we did not turn to music, novels, poetry, and things of that kind to inspire us? There's a human side to all of us in the library world, one that we perhaps have not explored enough and so I'm delighted to be interviewed. 

That's all folks. But wasn't it fun. Plus Angie has a slide talk that's about 45 minutes long about life on an antebellum plantation. She says she would be happy to present it to interested groups. I think I will ask her to speak to one of my women's groups! — KS

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share ten overseas offices that **Blackwell Ltd.** has established. We will undergo a major international expansion to bring **Readmore** and **BNam** into a more aggressive posture internationally. We are offering libraries an easy way to order books and journals. We let the customer make the choice as to preferred country of origin.

ATG: *So what kind of other changes will we see in the next few months? What's happening with personnel?*

PP: All the signs are to an expansion of our organization. We are negotiating to expand the office space in New York. I just closed a deal in Blackwood to purchase 7 acres of land to expand the distribution center. It's a growing business and we aren't standing still. In North America we have over 600 employees. I think all signs are toward growth.

ATG: *And what specific changes will we see?*

PP: **BHB** and **Readmore** will be very aggressive on getting into the world of electronic journals. **BORIS** (working title) is a significant investment in dealing with electronic journals, and is one component of a larger electronic media department being established in Oxford. This new department encompasses our existing online (CON-

NECT) and library interface (EDI) capabilities and our new **CD Complete** service. This new department will provide integrated one-stop shopping for customers' electronic information needs including technical and licensing advice and assistance, and a single point of access to all electronic journals. The **BORIS** team includes **Chris Beckett**, **Tina Feick**, **Heather Steele**, **Phil Cotes** (who you all know) and also some newer names including **Suzanne Wilson Higgins**, **Martin Marlow**, **Andrew Hutchings**, and **Rollo Turner**. Our plan is to pilot this in one place and then roll it across the whole **Blackwell** group. We are very excited about our agreement with **Primary Source Media** and **BookScope**. They shipped 2,600 CD-ROMs in January of 1996. We are in the process of developing the capability to provide the option of original cataloging to our currently existing CIP upgrade program. NTO is being designed to provide **BNam** and **BHB** book customers with access to all databases and management systems via the World Wide Web. Its plan is to be rolled out in modules to customers throughout 1996 and 1997. At **MLA** and **SLA** this coming May **Blackwells** and **Readmore** will begin sharing conference exhibit space. These are not so much changes as new directions that we are heading in. 

Well, one thing's for sure. Fred is not standing still either! I figure we'll need a satellite to catch him!

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day, I practice yoga, and I read whenever I can. My favorite books are biographies. I have always been curious (some say nosy) about what makes people tick.

ATG: *Do you want to tell us about any future plans for **Majors** as we close this up?*

ST: I would summarize life at **Majors** right now in one word —

transition. We have many irons in the fire, and we are always thinking of ways to take advantage of technology. We are working with **OCLC** right now to complete a **PromptCat** interface. We have been in conversations with **OCLC** about enhancing CIP records and **OCLC** is interested. We are also talking with librarians and bookstore managers all the time about where the information profession is headed. As I mentioned earlier, we are releasing our new CD product, **majors.docsm**, early this spring. And our biggest project right now is a comprehensive rewrite of our whole system into a fourth generation language called **Natural** that will allow us tremendous flexibility in serving librarians and bookstores. It's a fun time with lots going on! 